

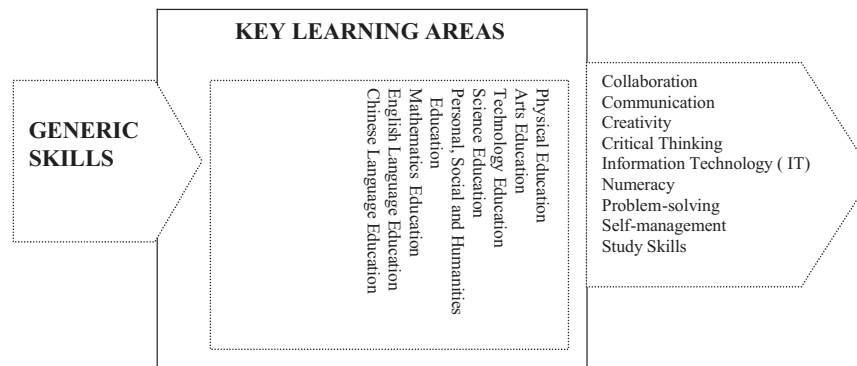
## UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION REFORM: INSIGHTS FROM STORIES OF THE CHANGING SCHOOL CONTEXT

### Introduction

By the turn of the twenty-first century, education reforms had become both a global and local phenomenon. Speaking to their global scale, Levin (2004) observed that schools have to “modify their operations in response to globalization, information technology, pressures for innovation, and changing views of human development” (p. 32). In a particular local society, there are specific histories and challenges that demand substantial changes in the education for the younger generation. As a result, various reforms are going on in school systems, curriculum organization, assessment, and teaching and learning practices. Hong Kong is no exception to this worldwide movement.

In 1999, two years after the return of sovereignty from the British to the Chinese Government, the new administration in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region launched a society-wide consultation and comprehensive review of the local education system (Curriculum Development Council, CDC, 1999). Major reform proposals, curriculum documents, and guidelines representing government policy were published in the following years (CDC, 2000, 2001, 2002; Education Commission, EC, 2000). The nature of the current reforms is much more radical and the scope much wider than the piecemeal changes that had been implemented by the former government over the previous ten to twenty years. Instead of focusing on specific aspects, the current reforms in Hong Kong propose fundamental changes for educational aims, values, and directions for more effective teaching and learning. New approaches to learning have been encouraged (Yuen, 2004). The vision for the new generation in education reform is to enable students to experience all-round development and life-long learning (EC, 2000). “The school curriculum should provide all students with essential life-long learning experiences for whole person development” (CDC, 2001, p. v). In the new curriculum framework, nine generic skills underpinning the key learning areas made up of subject matter knowledge are emphasized for the development of students through teaching and learning in different subject contexts (see Figure 1). The nine generic skills include: collaboration skills, communication skills, creativity, critical thinking skills, information technology skills, numeracy skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills, and study skills.

In this article, we argue that no matter how well a reform is conceptualized and planned, it is in the frontline schools and classrooms that the reform goals and strategies are tried out, reflected on, and refined. In this reform process, teachers and principals are the people who possess tacit knowledge of the actual implementation of the reform within their particular constraints and resources. This article reports on a study of reforms that were carried out in one local primary school in Hong Kong.



**Figure 1.** Relationship between the learning of key subject matter knowledge and generic skills.

The study seeks to learn from the experiences of the teachers and principal about the challenges and dynamics of the reform process in the school by attending closely to their everyday stories and experiences from the field. This work thus develops a narrative understanding of education reform by focusing on the experiences of educators who work on the ground level (Craig, 2003) in a shifting school context.

After explaining the theoretical and methodological frameworks for our research and the socio-historical context in which our study is situated, we present here the principal's and teachers' stories of reform. These stories reveal their process of transforming a school into a more caring, learning-centered environment, and provide lessons for other reform leaders.

### Theoretical Framework

Research literature reveals that most studies and critiques of school reforms in Hong Kong are focused at the grand systemic level (e.g., Cheng, 2005; Lai & Lo, 2005; Wong & Chu, 2005). The difficulties encountered during the years of reform were explained broadly as, first, the failure of directly imported innovations to cross cultures (Glenwright, 2003; Morris, 2002); second, the divergence between policy intent and interpretations and acts of reform at the school level (Morris, 2002); third, the lack of communication among stakeholders concerning policy design, formulation, and implementation (Lam, 2003); and last, unhealthy and dreadful situations at the frontline (Cheng, 2006; Lee & Ip, 2005; Lo, 2001). The focus of these works was mostly on exploring the difficulties and failures of reforms at the conceptual or systemic levels. They seldom discussed the practical experiences and lessons learned in individual schools. What we observed from local research on school reform echoed Farrell's (2000) observation in other countries: "Much more is known about what does not work, or does not usually work, than what does work" (p. 95). This paper addresses the importance of exploring the prac-

tical situations and experiences of the school context. We argue that the practical wisdom and experiences of the practitioners at the classroom and school levels can complement our understanding of the promises and challenges of the reforms in action.

By adopting a narrative inquiry approach in our research, we studied what was happening in the lives of children, teachers, and the principal during the reform process. This inquiry into school reforms is positioned at the interface between the demands of changing contexts, and their expression in school practices. In seeking to understand school reforms, the narrative approach does not see reform as top-down political and social change; neither is it perceived to be a simple naturalistic adaptation to the environment, or just some individual initiatives and leaders' actions. A narrative study sees the reforms as a process of change situated in the context of different historical, political, cultural, economic, and social contexts. These contexts constitute constraints and opportunities for action. We see individual practitioners in schools—the teachers and the principals—constantly refining their knowledge, identity, and philosophy through their interactions. We agree with Clandinin and Connelly (1998) who see research as a way of gaining understanding of experiences and, at the same time, as a practical and moral endeavor that influences the lives of children:

If the research in which we engage does not make such a difference [in the lives of children and their teachers], what is its purpose? Why engage in such research if its purpose is not to influence the lives of children in educative ways? (p. 152)

Clandinin and Connelly (1998, 2000) make the case that narrative inquiry is a powerful tool for understanding human experience being played out in school reforms and other situations. Craig (2001) echoes this in a longitudinal study that examines “the relationships between and among teachers' knowledge developments, their knowledge community and their attitudes toward school reform” (p. 303). Our study offers an example of a narrative inquiry that explores how school reforms were experienced by the students, teachers, and the principal in one particular school against the backdrop of the mega-reforms that were taking place throughout Hong Kong.

### **Methodology**

We adopted a narrative inquiry methodology for our research that is based on theories developed by Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Within this narrative orientation, school reforms are seen as being contextualized in temporal, situational, and personal and social dimensions.

This is a report of one part of a wider qualitative study that sought to understand the reform phenomenon of the local primary school context. It drew data from the first 12 months' study of the researched school. The primary data collection methods included archival research, document analysis, reflective journals, participant observations, and semi-structured and open interviews with school practitioners.

In the first half year, access to information about the school was gained mainly by studying school documents and interviewing the principal. We closely followed the development of the school through regular open-ended interviews with the principal around topics related to the development of the school, difficulties encountered, and opportunities that the principal perceived. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, the school documents including annual reports and year plans were studied. We also read media reports and interviews about the school and the principal. We gained an understanding of the historical and contextual background of the school through document analysis and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

During the last two months of the first 12-month period, we gained access to other stakeholders besides the principal in the course of a four-week intensive school visit. During these four weeks, we participated in school assemblies, made classroom observations and arranged interviews with teachers and students. The subject classrooms included Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics, and General Studies. These are the most essential subjects in the core curriculum for primary schools in Hong Kong. Eight teachers and ten students were interviewed. This group of teachers included one subject panel (i.e., department) chair and one ordinary teacher from each of the above named main subjects. We also participated in school functions like staff meetings and school activities.

## **Background of the Study**

### *The Changing School Context*

Waterfront Primary School<sup>1</sup> is a newly reestablished Christian primary school for boys. It has a long history dating back to the 1920s. However, the old school was closed down and reopened in recent years. In 2003, the Church sponsoring body reopened the school, after a closure of 40 years, in a new campus adjacent to a secondary school under the same sponsoring body. The secondary school has a long history and is one of the most prestigious schools in Hong Kong. In negotiation with the Government for a new campus to rebuild the secondary and primary schools, there was an agreement made between the Government and the Church sponsoring body: The primary school had to merge with another primary school in a nearby district with declining enrollment. This is an important part of the school's identity and will explain many of the difficulties the school has to face in its reform process. When Waterfront Primary School reopened, the majority of its students came from newly-arrived immigrant families. It was not uncommon to find students who came from families with low incomes or single-parent families with either the mother living in Mainland China or the father working far away from home. These families often struggled socially and materially at a subsistence level and were not able to offer extra support for their children's schoolwork.

The historical development just described has contributed to the current landscape of Waterfront Primary School. The structural changes in

the local community and policy changes in the education system (including the media of instruction and the assessment and selection systems) brought about by education reform all constitute part of the complex and dynamic environment for school practitioners. In a narrative approach to studying school reforms, it is essential to understand the relationship between the practitioners' actions and the contexts in which they are situated.

### *The Changing Social Context*

The aim of this research was to explore what is happening at the interface between teacher knowledge and the demands from changing school contexts and its expression in school practices. The Government initiated an overhaul of the education system because of the perceived local and global changes in the political, economic, and social contexts (Bray & Koo, 1999; Bray & Lee, 1997; CDC, 2001; EC, 2000; Postiglione & Lee, 1998). In Hong Kong, the change in sovereignty in 1997 from the British to the Chinese was a major historical and political event with inevitable implications for the education of school children (Shive, 1996). With the rapid development of closer connections between Hong Kong and the Mainland in the business and political arenas, the economy has become more "knowledge-based" and demands a more flexible workforce (Kennedy, 2005). The decline in birth rate and the arrival of new immigrants and their children have also increased the diversity within the school population. These changes in society have repercussions in each and every school in Hong Kong. As a result, school contexts have become more fluid and have posed new challenges for principals, teachers, and students. It was our intention to explore how the teachers and principal in our research school experienced the reform process within this changing context.

## **Results**

### *The Principal's Story of Reform*

Mrs. Ma is the second principal of Waterfront Primary School since it reopening in 2003. The first principal left after one year's service. For this research, Mrs. Ma was the main contact through which we were able to understand the effects of the reforms on the school. Before actual school visits were made near the end of the first 12 months, knowledge about the school's development was learned mainly from regular and extensive interviews with Mrs. Ma.

Mrs. Ma is an experienced principal who came from another primary school where she had served for over ten years. It was a well-established school with a student population mainly made up of girls from middle class families. The students she used to teach were generally well behaved with good family support. At that school, Mrs. Ma demonstrated strong leadership and developed a good rapport with the staff.

Waterfront Primary School's background and composition were new to Mrs. Ma and offered her a challenging administrative experience.

In addition to the students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, as discussed before, the staff, which had transferred from the declining school, also posed difficulties for Mrs. Ma. The team of teachers, especially the middle management, was a disappointment to Mrs. Ma because their morale was low and they displayed hostility. One of the stories she told about a senior staff meeting when she first arrived showed the general culture among senior teachers then:

At the first meeting with senior members of staff, I saw a fight between two teachers arguing for a favorable timetable for their own benefit. I was surprised because I have never come across such a fight between teachers representing the middle management in a school. If these are the teachers in the management, what could I expect from other teachers? (Principal Interview 041216)

In contrast with the harmonious and the successful experience of her previous school, Mrs. Ma had to handle issues concerning the complexity in personnel when she assumed her new post. The scene she witnessed at the middle management meeting was unimaginable to Mrs. Ma and disappointed her a lot. She was very frustrated with her staff but did not give up. The incentive for her to carry on seemed to have come from a number of sources. In another interview, Mrs. Ma told us why she had not given up and still maintained her passion for education which generated the incentive needed to carry out reforms:

Before I assumed the principal's office, the first task I was eager to take on was to interview some 20 students identified as "problem cases" by the teachers in the school. I invited the parents to come with their children to the interviews. While I talked to the parents, I also observed the students. I wondered why there were so many difficult cases in one school alone. After interviewing all these "problematic" children, I discovered that many of them were in fact talented in drawing, science, or reading. The problem was not the students. (Principal Interview 050109)

From interviewing the students and their parents, Mrs. Ma thought that poor teaching may not be satisfying the curiosity and different learning needs of the students, thus causing various classroom problems. She considered that the problem was rooted in poor classroom teaching. She saw that the numerous objectives proposed in the various reform documents could be boiled down into one most important concern—to provide the best educational experience for the children, and this could only be achieved by competent teachers doing their jobs professionally in the school and classrooms. The need to strengthen the capacity of teaching and learning became the top priority on Mrs. Ma's agenda for reforming Waterfront Primary School. The various strategies she put forward, recruiting new teachers and encouraging good quality teaching for instance, were geared toward this ultimate goal she set in the beginning to reform the school.

In order to understand more about the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers in the school, the principal made arrangements to observe the classroom teaching of every teacher in the school. The results of these observations confirmed the teaching problems she had identified earlier,



as illustrated by the following example she told us about in an interview:

Miss Fong's classroom was in chaos when I went for a lesson observation. I have never seen such a classroom with an "experienced" teacher before. It was worse than a marketplace—no rules, no methods, poor teaching and learning. (Principal Interview 041216)

This was the classroom of a teacher who had been teaching for over 10 years in the old school and had already been promoted to a senior position.

Furthermore, in dealing with the "problem students" with special educational needs, Mrs. Ma discovered different sides of the stories by going over them with the students and their parents. Here is one example:

It had been recorded in the disciplinary case file that the boy had misbehaved and shown disrespect to the teacher. However, I learnt another version of the story when I asked the boy to retell the story. The story as recalled by the boy was like this: In the General Studies class, the teacher invited them to make different metaphors for the Earth model he had brought to class. "Hell" was the answer the boy gave. The teacher was mad at him because he thought the student was trying to disrupt classroom discipline by speaking nonsense. In fact, if the boy had been allowed to elaborate, he would have had time to tell the teacher his knowledge about pollution found on the Earth. (Principal Interview 050109)

The above incidents show why Mrs. Ma was disappointed with the teaching and learning provided by her teachers. In the early months, improving the quality of teaching naturally became the top priority on the principal's agenda for school reform. With the help of some more competent teachers among the staff, she promoted various initiatives to improve the teaching capacity of the teachers, like peer coaching, collective lesson planning, and in-house training for the teachers in their basic professional competences.

### *The Teachers' Story of Reform*

Besides helping teachers in her school to improve, Mrs. Ma started to invite other teachers to join the school with new posts being created partly from the expansion of the school, and partly from older teachers retiring and others leaving. By recruiting more new staff to the school, the composition of the school's teaching staff started to change. Mrs. Wong was one of the English teachers Mrs. Ma employed, and she was appointed subject panel head as soon as she took up her duties. Mrs. Wong shared her tough early experiences at the school with us:

The principal has high expectation for the quality of teaching and learning. This was the weakest part of the English Language team. Colleagues did not seem to understand their weaknesses. As a new panel chair and teacher in this school, I had to take a leading role. For all collaborative work like peer lesson preparation and collaborative teaching, I had to be personally involved. I had to demonstrate innovative teaching by modeling and opening up my classroom. That was the hardest time I have ever had in my teaching life. (Mrs. Wong, English teacher, Interview 051129)

Mrs. Wong was not alone in the innovative ways of teaching she introduced. Miss Lee, a new recruit, also shared her experience in such collaboration (Miss Lee, English teacher; Interview 051206). She described the beginning time as very tough but said the situation is improving as more teachers join the originally very small innovative group. Besides the stress of teaching, new teachers sometimes experienced stress from working with old members of the staff. Mrs. Wong recalled an experience of being criticized for being one of the intruders in the school taking away jobs and thus being identified as one of “the principal’s people.” Mrs. Wong, however, had sympathy for these colleagues. “While a school is under reform, teachers will feel stressed. The colleague who was mad at me must have had suppressed grievances for a long period of time” (Mrs. Wong, English teacher, Interview 051129).

Further observation seemed to show that the principal’s strategy of changing the team was right as other positive changes to the team were made. Another new teacher in her team shared the collaborative experience she had with the native-speaking English teacher (NET)<sup>2</sup> in order to improve the teaching and learning of students:

The NET teacher came to my class on alternate weeks and spent a double period with us. We would practice a variety of language activities including phonetics exercises and story telling in the English Room with students. They enjoyed the activities and games very much. (Miss Lee, English teacher, Interview 051206)

There were other changes we witnessed in the school that were not directly related to classroom teaching but played an important part in enhancing the self-image of students, especially those from disadvantaged families. We saw photographs of individual students being posted everywhere: on the walls in the principal’s office and the staff room, in the corridors, and inside the elevators in the school. These pictures were taken by a teacher who was a keen amateur photographer. The teacher told us that he wished to take at least one memorable picture of each of the students in the school and present it as a gift to them (Mr. Man, IT teacher, Interview 051214). He said that many of his students, especially those from poor families, might not have a decent picture of their own. He wanted to capture the students’ shining moments for them to cherish and remember. He discovered that these pictures also served as a way of boosting the self-image of the boys. In the interview, he told us a typical story of how a picture could change a boy’s cynical attitude:

Last year, I had a boy in my class who was very cynical. He never smiled when he knew someone was taking pictures of him. His mother said he had never had a decent picture taken since he was born. One day, I noticed he was having fun and laughing with his friends during recess. I captured this moment using my camera. It was a pretty handsome picture. I showed the picture to his mother and told her that her son was a really handsome boy. Both the boy and his mother were very happy. They never knew he could have such a decent picture taken. A few days later, she even showed the picture to her neighbors. I noticed that the boy was feeling more



positive and less cynical towards other people. (Mr. Man, IT teacher, Interview 051214)

These pictures we saw around the school not only helped to promote the self image of individual students, they also changed the school from a neat and functional building to a warm and lively environment that increases the students' sense of belonging. The principal strongly believed that the students did not only learn inside the classrooms but also learned when they felt safe and a sense of belonging as soon as they stepped into the school. During our intensive school visits, we noticed that caring for students started at the beginning of each school day with the students being greeted personally by the principal and teachers at the school entrance. It is not uncommon to see students, especially those younger ones, giving and receiving passionate hugs from the teachers. As a teacher remarked, these small caring actions worked and gradually changed the atmosphere of the school and the attitude of the students.

With shy students who did not seem to respond as affectionately at first, I saw a change, some after the first time, others changed after several times of the teachers' persistently greeting them. Students started to greet people with their heads up. (Mr. Lo, General Studies teacher, Interview 051206)

As we explained above, Waterfront Primary School had a mixed student population with students transferred from the old school, as well as new intakes. Many of the students from the old school were new arrivals from Mainland China and were from low-income families. When the old school merged with the newly opened Waterfront Primary School, the expanded establishment made more places available for new intakes. As one teacher observed, this changed the composition of students and created a more diverse student population:

The family backgrounds of students vary. Many of the old students come from low-income families but the new intakes are not. With the present school being linked to a prestigious secondary school, it has attracted students from middle class families in neighboring districts. (Mr. Lo, General Studies teacher, Interview 051206)

Waterfront Primary School, though situated in a low-income area, has attracted students from better-off families. In comparing the family backgrounds of new and old students, Mr. Lo saw the different expectations parents laid on their children. Parents from different social classes have different understandings about education, and have thus brought their children up in ways that lead to very different learning experiences:

In the old school, parents might not expect their children to pursue university education. With the new intakes, we have different parents. We see higher expectations placed on children. Students from middle class families are given more exposure in arts or sports activities outside the formal school curriculum that are provided by their middle class parents. (Interview 051206)

Mr. Man, another teacher who joined the school in the first year of its reopening, agreed that students did come from very diverse family backgrounds, from both wealthy and poor families. He recalled an experi-

ence he had when he was teaching the concept of money in a General Studies lesson. One day, he told the students how they would help their families by earning money in the future. However he soon discovered that some of the students had already started earning money after school by helping their parents to run small hawker business.

Among the students that are transferred from the old school, some have to help to earn money for their families after school. Their lives become more hectic when they return home. The student composition is very diverse. You can easily notice the difference just by watching how students leave school. Some students from rich families are pampered by their maids queuing outside the school, waiting to carry their schoolbags immediately upon leaving the school gate. (Mr. Man, IT teacher, Interview 051214)

Other observations on the classroom performance of students also echo the differences mentioned here. This is from another new teacher in the school, noting the differences in abilities of the students:

The ability range of the boys is very wide. In the top class, students could finish a test within five minutes, while the same test given to the weakest class might take 20 to 25 minutes. A one-shoe-fits-all test can never meet the needs of students now. I need to add some difficult questions for the top class as “challenge” questions. (Miss Lam, General Studies teacher, Interview 051129)

The difference in family backgrounds has led to differences in student learning. Fortunately, the change in teaching culture has contributed to ways of teaching that will deal with these differences. Teachers have attempted to nurture a kind and caring culture in the school. From student interviews, we learned that more positive reinforcement like praise and gifts are used (Student interview 051213).

### *Teachers' Practice in the Reform Context*

The focus of this article has been on how school practitioners experienced school reforms, and what teacher knowledge and practices were observed in the reform process. In this report, we have narrated the school reforms first from changes that happened in the school context and among teachers. What follows are the changes that weave together teachers' practice in reforming the school curriculum and its culture.

As the end of the first semester approached, the principal started to plan a new timetable. The main change was to lengthen class time by reducing the number of lessons. In the process, she drew from her experience from her previous school where timetabling had been reformed. The number of lessons was reduced from eight to six, with class time extended from 35 to 45 minutes per lesson. The change was generally well received by both teachers and students when it was put into practice the following year. In consequence, more activities were undertaken with greater flexibility. This allowed more room for creative teaching strategies and learning experiences. These new strategies included activities designed for both the formal and informal curriculum.

In the formal curriculum, new content and assessment methods were introduced. These changes were consistent with recommendations that were part of the large-scale education reforms in Hong Kong. Improved teaching and learning for students was evidenced by the overall improvement in academic results as reported in the School Annual Report.<sup>3</sup> The students' learning attitude, as reflected by the teachers, has become more positive. New strategies for teaching and learning were experimented with. The principal also encouraged innovative practice in teaching. From our observations and teachers' interviews, we noticed that more teachers were willing to work longer hours at school. Mr. Man's reflections on the changing morale at work are good evidence of this:

Colleagues stayed late at school. If you visited the staffroom at six, you would see the majority of our teachers still working there. Not many will have left the school though the school day ends by 2:25 pm. Some may even stay till seven or eight in the evening. If you come back around ten, you will still be able to see lights on here. (Mr. Man, IT teacher, Interview 051214)

Being willing to work for longer hours was seen by Mr. Man as evidence of the change in teachers' attitudes toward school. Longer working hours, however, have caused the teachers a great deal of stress. While recognizing that a positive change had taken place, Mr. Man also had worries that this might not be healthy for the teachers in the long run:

I don't mind working hard because I know I am doing some good for the students. But I can see that many colleagues here are having no time for their own families. They have no time for their partners and children. They have long working hours everyday and even come back during the weekends. This is unhealthy.

I also teach General Studies but I don't have enough time to read newspapers. If I carry on like this, I will not be able to catch up with what is happening in society in three or five years. How can I teach well then? (Mr. Man, IT teacher, Interview 051214)

The dilemma between working long hours for the benefits of students and leaving insufficient time for families is one difficulty school reformers need to think about and be concerned with. We saw the positive changes on the quality of teaching and learning at Waterfront Primary School, but perhaps there is also a need for balancing teachers' personal and professional lives.

Besides changes in the formal curriculum, there was an increase in the variety of co-curricular activities carried out after school and on Saturdays as informal curriculum. There were more interest clubs organized for the students, including ball games, chess, and drum beating. The school also made use of the festival season to arrange large-scale celebrations for the whole school, the students, and their families. These included a festive dinner organized during Chinese New Year and a fund raising Walkathon held in the school playground. These activities served to create a sense of community for the students and also provided opportunities for the parents to participate in school functions. It also fostered a stronger partnership between the teachers and parents involved in educating the children.

With various reforms in the curriculum, teaching, and learning, the school context was gradually changing. We noticed that children, especially students with special educational needs (SEN), were treated patiently. Each child with SEN in the school was matched with a pair of “school parents.” These “parents” were their teachers in the school. Whenever they were emotionally upset, the first referral would be made to their school parents instead of to the social worker or guidance teacher or their parents, with the result that problematic behavior among these children was greatly reduced.

### **Learning for Education Reform in Schools**

We believe that school reforms cannot be understood just by snapshot studies. The narrative approach to studying school reforms allows us to learn from front-line school practices in a more detailed and nuanced manner. Being narrative inquirers, we were able to attend closely to people’s experiences of school reforms and were able to recognize the success they achieved as well as the challenges they encountered. In the course of the study, we were stepping in and out of the reform parade, and also taking advantage of our changing positions as critical friends and researchers in the parade to observe, participate, and reflect. The insights into the experiences reported here will hopefully benefit other policymakers and school practitioners as they implement and sustain current reforms. We want to conclude by sharing three implications with reform leaders.

First, a reform leader needs to convey a clear sense of reform purpose and priority in the everyday business of the school. From our study, we saw that the principal was always firm and clear that the educational welfare of the children was the prime concern in guiding her reforms in the school. Learning was the core business of the school and teaching quality was seen as being of utmost importance. From the outset, the principal had set clear targets for improving teaching and learning quality. Reform of the design of the timetable and the development of the curriculum were done to facilitate change toward improving these.

Second, it is essential that a reform leader is able to recognize and utilize the teachers’ knowledge in pursuing a common reform goal for the school. Recognizing and using the teacher’s photographic skills and passion was one example we saw that was in line with the overall goal of education: bringing out the best in each and every child. Recognizing the weaknesses of the English panel, the new panel chair also demonstrated her knowledge and experience in leading and helping colleagues to improve teaching quality through new initiatives like peer lesson preparation, collaborative teaching, and peer classroom observation.

Third, it is important that a reform leader values the contributions made by teachers and sees teachers as whole persons with the need for a healthy balance between work and family lives. At Waterfront Primary School, we saw rapid and extensive changes both inside and outside the school. Some of these changes were imposed by the external environment. Some were initiated internally. These changes were inevitable for reforming the school at its critical stage. However, the tension, challenges, and

extended work hours brought about by the school reforms must be carefully handled by teachers, principals, and policymakers. As Mr. Man remarked, many of the devoted teachers were experiencing difficulties in balancing their professional and personal lives. This could have adverse consequences on teachers if it goes on and on without wise leadership.

In summary, we have come to an understanding of education reform from a narrative perspective. From the lived experiences of the teachers and principal, we understand that for reforms to succeed, leaders need to (a) convey to practitioners a clear sense of reform purpose and priority, (b) recognize and utilize teachers' knowledge in the pursuit of the reform goal, and (c) balance between teachers' personal and professional lives in order to sustain the reform in the long run. We learned these lessons through the many stories we gathered and witnessed at close range for a sustained period in the school. Such lessons would not be possible without attending closely to the daily stories and valuing the experiences of educators in the field.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Waterfront Primary School is a pseudonym made up for the school. Pseudonyms are also used for the principal and teachers in this study.

<sup>2</sup> A NET teacher is an English teacher employed under the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme. This teacher is required to teach English as a second language to Chinese students and assist in teacher and curriculum development in the school.

<sup>3</sup> It is a common practice in Hong Kong that schools will detail their yearly development, including administrative, teaching, and learning growth, in the School Annual Report.

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